Tactics and Tips

Sibling Rivalry, Take Two

By Andy and Greg Collins

Character death, like making fun of the bard, is an inevitability when it comes to a long-running campaign. If consequences of actions matter, you have to back that up with an occasional fatality. Some players might have a death wish for their characters from first level, while others see their masterpieces forced into early retirement due to a particularly brutal encounter or overwhelming odds (or for some, the underwhelming odds of a bad saving throw).

Did the party not appreciate the nuances with which you played the poor, lost soul? Not enough gold on hand for the raise dead? Or maybe you don't want to sign that deal for the cash with the red and scaly fellow with a bifurcated tail carrying a hay fork? Then it must be time to roll up a new character! No problem, right?

Well, that depends . . .

Andy: Okay, Greg. So that's it for Deneb the cleric. Too bad -- I'm sure the paladin, rogue, and sorcerer of your party will miss him. Will your next cleric also worship Bort, patron god of foolhardiness, or are you going to try a different deity?

Greg: Cleric, schmerick. I want to play a two-weapon duelist (whose deity also happens to be named Bort).

Andy: Uh, no cleric then? How long do you expect this duelist to last, exactly?

For more information on character death, you might also consult the following Save My Game articles:

- Character Death
- Dead Characters and the Campaign
- New Character Introductions
- Character Do-overs

Andy: I can already see the DMs out there nodding along. We've all seen this happen -- somebody decides to change characters, without necessarily realizing that they're also vacating a crucial party role.

Particularly at low- to mid-levels, every character in the party must bring something to the group that no one else has. Each character may (and in fact, probably should) be a specialist, but the group as a whole has to cover the crucial bases in order to have a good chance of succeeding (much less surviving).

In **D&D**, the four basic party roles are usually defined as follows:

- "Bruiser" (the tough melee-based character who serves as the primary line of defense against big, bad monsters);
- "Blaster" (the ranged-attack specialist, traditionally an arcane caster with plenty of area spells such as *fireball*);
- "Sneaker" (the eyes, ears, fingers, and quiet feet of the party, who usually mixes melee and ranged attacks); and
- "Healer" (the one who keeps everyone else on their feet during the fight, and patches everyone up afterward).

While plenty of variations on these four roles exist (and some classes don't quite fit), going entirely without any one of them means you're likely to have a significant vulnerability to cover in other ways.

So what do you say to the player who wants to radically change his character's role in the group?

First things first: Try to understand why the player wants to make the change. Don't jump to conclusions -- instead, sit down for a chat (or a phone call, or some email or IM banter).

So let's rewind.

Greg: Cleric, schmerick. I want to play a two-weapon duelist (whose deity also happens to be named Bort).

Andy: Well, Greg, that's a pretty big change. Any particular reason?

Greg: Deneb was a 5th-level cleric when he died. He was a long way from getting to the meat of what being a cleric is about, and I was tired of just healing people. I craved action. I want to be in the fight from the get-go, not hanging around the outside waiting for Alarion to get dropped, or taking several rounds to buff myself up to bruiserweight class. If we can get the drop on a monster, we'll take it down before we even need that healing to kick in.

If you think of it economically, the decision costs a few more gold pieces per character per adventure as we stock up on healing potions and wands. But hey, Alarion the paladin can use a *wand of cure light wounds* pretty easily, and he can even give a try on some of those scrolls that Deneb was carrying around. And who's to say the next guy to take a dirt nap won't pick up the holy soup ladle of Bort with his or her next character?

Andy: It's true that Alarion could pick up some of the healing slack. That'd be a good thing to bring up next time the group is stocking up on supplies.

You might also suggest that the rogue start spending skill points on Use Magic Device, which would let her carry around a wand or two as well. It's only a DC 20 check -- maybe a little tough during a fight, but with a few rounds to spare she can get people back into fighting shape.

But that all relies on other players changing the way they play their characters. What about making a small tweak to your character concept that might allow you to keep contributing in that area? Look at all the other classes that can provide a bit of cleric-type mojo: besides the obvious *Player's Handbook* options, there's the favored soul, shugenja, and spirit shaman from *Complete Divine*, the healer (*Miniatures Handbook*), and the incarnate (*Magic of Incarnum*). Splashing even a level or two of one of those classes doesn't hurt your concept too much and keeps the party from being high and dry. Heck, the psychic warrior (*Expanded Psionics Handbook*) has a few "fix-yourself" powers, and you'd still be getting a bunch of fighter bonus feats!

Greg: Ah, the possibilities. Certainly, a tweak from the straight-up swashbuckling type is doable. Or maybe I can meet the same character concept with creative multiclassing . . . say, a ranger/spellthief? He'll use two weapons and have the quick wit of a swashbuckler, but without the fancy shirt-and-pants combo. And hey, look at that -- I've even helped solve our "missing cleric" problem, provided I can steal the right spells. If nobody else wants that Use Magic Device shtick, I'll jump on it. Being the receptacle of semi-useful wands isn't the worst job in the world.

Andy: (Says the former player of the bard/fighter/holy liberator, who had more wands by 20th level than any character I can remember.)

Greg: So is this party of a paladin, sorcerer, rogue, and ranger/spellthief salvageable? We have a few dabblers straying from the specialty paths, but to me that makes for a more unique and memorable campaign. You're not going to ruin us just because we didn't pay perfect attention in Party Building 101, are you?

Andy: You make a good point. Since a typical **D&D** adventure assumes a normal array of party roles, a DM whose group doesn't cover all the normal bases must be aware of that lack. A party without a true healer can't bounce back as quickly during (or after) a tough encounter. Going without a bruiser means everyone's likely to take more damage in melee, while going without a blaster means fights last longer. Of the four, being without a sneaker is probably the least punishing, but say that to the party that's just dragged itself through the trap-filled tomb!

It's okay -- even recommended -- for a DM with this kind of group to adjust some of the encounters to keep them fun. You don't have to change everything (nothing's wrong with your PCs having a bit of extra challenge now and again), but make sure that your encounters don't depend on a missing role.

A party with no cleric may well find that undead encounters get a little tougher, but that's fine. Maybe the sorcerer learns a spell or two to help with that, or the paladin takes Improved Turning. It's pretty natural for other characters to evolve to fill the "gap" created by this kind of character switch -- in a few levels, you may not even realize that you're "missing" anything at all. (On the other hand, if an encounter assumes that the party is absolutely doomed without a bunch of *restoration* spells, that's a good recipe for frustration.)

Greg: And, of course, as players we can always threaten to come back as the all-cleric party. (After all, they were voted the most powerful core class.

Game Resources: To use the material in this article to its fullest, check out the following resources: *Dungeon Master's Guide*, *Monster Manual*, *Player's Handbook*.

About the Author

By day, **Andy Collins** works as an RPG developer in Wizards of the Coast R&D. His development credits include the *Player's Handbook* v.3.5, *Races of Eberron,* and *Dungeon Master's Guide II.* By night, however, he fights crime as a masked vigilante. Or does he?

As a **D&D** player, **Greg Collins** has been taking whatever older brother Andy can dish out for more than 20 years. Recently he took a seat behind the screen to exact his revenge upon his brother for killing his first character by washing him down a flight of stairs. In his time spent away from **D&D**, Greg is the events producer for magicthegathering.com.

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